
Birding northern Kenya: in search of Masked Lark

Spizocorys personata

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Observer les oiseaux au nord du Kenya: à la recherche de l'Alouette masquée *Spizocorys personata*. Le nord du Kenya est actuellement peu fréquenté par les ornithologues. En mars–avril 2005 les auteurs y ont visité certaines zones, notamment le Parc national de Marsabit et le désert de Dida Galgalu, ainsi que le Lac Turkana et le désert de Horr avoisinant. Ils y ont recherché et photographié l'Alouette masquée *Spizocorys personata* et d'autres espèces et sous-espèces du désert.

During March–April 2005 we took the opportunity, whilst working in Kenya, to visit parts of north-central Kenya to look for and photograph Masked Lark *Spizocorys personata* and other desert species and subspecies. We also planned to undertake more general bird photography in the region, including in Marsabit National Park and the Dida Galgalu desert, as well as Lake Turkana and the adjacent Horr desert. Our plan was developed following discussions with many Kenyan bird and wildlife experts. We concluded that the far north of Kenya had been under-explored in recent times, largely because of the banditry and civil unrest in the border areas with Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan, and as such was worthy of visiting.

Planning

We timed our expedition to coincide with the annual meeting in Nairobi of the regional African development programme that we manage at the Australian Foundation in Sydney. We worked closely with our foundation counterpart, Concern Universal Kenya, who provided information concerning the area and helped us procure a sturdy jeep to undertake the venture. Unfortunately we were unable to find many people who had visited the area in recent years and several others assured us that the area was far too dangerous and that, in any case, local authorities would prevent us from entering. The net result was that we just decided to head north and 'play it by ear' as we went.

We decided not to use a driver as the techniques that we use for vehicular bird photography are quite specialised, and it is too time-consuming to train local drivers to understand or utilise them effectively. Furthermore, they necessitate travelling at very low speeds, of 20–30 km/h maximum, which most local drivers find very difficult. We

also decided to use guides only as and when the need arose.

Other than a good GPS and our optical and photographic equipment, we did not carry any other specialised gear. We bought cheap mattresses, sheets, tarpaulins and lots of water, but with little chance of major rainfall, we did not elect to carry a tent. We also had a very detailed map of northern Kenya.

Security and logistics

Travelling in northern Kenya is a calculated risk that should be approached carefully and preferably not alone. It is a rugged destination that demands complete self-sufficiency and some expedition experience. Such a trip requires a 4×4 vehicle with high ground clearance. Ideally, don't use a newer model or vehicle that is in particularly good condition, as the fancier it is, the more it will be coveted. Ensure that you have a good GPS and map as there are no road signs. Also ensure that you carry plenty of extra fuel. Yellow cooking oil barrels are cheap and easy to use, but ensure they are secured firmly and check them frequently for leaks. Always carry two spare tyres. Night drives should not be contemplated. Some nights we were caught out, given our slow speeds, but ideally you should be in or close to your hotel or at your campsite before sunset.

If sleeping out, always camp c.1–2 km from the main road, well out of sight of any passing traffic and always make sure that you erase your tracks where you turn off, so it is not readily evident that a vehicle has left the track. This is particularly important in sandy or muddy areas. In the rocky Dida Galgalu, such precautions are not really necessary as your tracks are not readily visible. Choose a campsite by looking for evidence of wildlife and lack of signs of human or domestic

animal activity. Sites with lots of duikers and no sign of domestic animals reduce your chances of being found. The importance of security in northern Kenya should not be under-estimated. In early 2006, almost 80 people were killed in Turbi when they were attacked by rebels from Ethiopia.

That said, we did not encounter many people in the desert. Occasionally we would pass large transport trucks full of people and goods, usually travelling from Moyale on the Ethiopian border south to Marsabit and beyond. We often left the jeep parked in the bush and wandered off. Occasionally when we returned a nomad with a small herd of goats or sheep would be resting in the shade of the jeep. Carry bottles of water to give to people that you meet in remote areas, as in this area of Kenya it helps you to make friends quickly. Once you hand out water, the people often seem content to leave you to your birdwatching rather than hassling you.

It is worth driving slowly. Not only will you see many more birds by so doing, but you will also save your tyres and your jeep generally. Desert birds are often quite lethargic due to the heat and shelter under bushes and rocks. They are easily flushed when approached on foot, causing them unnecessary stress, but if approached slowly in a vehicle they generally permit photography without being disturbed.

Birding sites

Isiolo to Marsabit (274 km)

The Ewaso Ngiro River marks the border of Eastern and Rift Valley Provinces and offers good birding along the valley. The rolling scrub forest north of the river is home to **Vulturine Guineafowl** *Acryllium vulturinum*, **Buff-crested Bustard** *Eupodotis gindiana*, **White-bellied Go-away Bird** *Corythaixoides leucogaster* and **Von der Decken's Hornbill** *Tockus deckeni*. Crossing back into Eastern Province, we also visited Losai National Reserve where we quickly found **Somali Ostrich** *Struthio camelus molybdophanes*, **Yellow-necked Spurfowl** *Francolinus leucoscepus*, **Crested Francolin** *Francolinus sephaena grantii* and **Fischer's Starling** *Spreo fischeri*.

Marsabit National Park

Encompassing altitudes from 502 to 1,344 m, Marsabit National Park protects a range of habitats from the rolling hills and upland forests of the

Marsabit Mountains, through a transitional area of upland grasslands and open forest, to *Acacia* scrub and rocky deserts at lower, more arid elevations. The uplands contain numerous natural and artificial waterholes.

We stayed in Marsabit at a local Muslim-owned hotel, the Jey Jey Centre, set around a pleasant courtyard with a small restaurant attached. The rooms are clean and some have private baths but most have shared facilities. The electricity and water pressure are, however, somewhat sporadic.

We spent two days exploring the northern and southern sectors of the national park. The hills above 1,000 m were densely forested. Moisture is gained from nightly fogs which envelop the higher areas each evening, permitting the presence of a completely separate suite of forest bird species from the surrounding lower elevation desert and open scrub. Forest residents in the highlands of

Captions to plates on pages 212–213

(all photographs taken in northern Kenya, March–April 2005, by Kevin Vang and Wojciech Dabrowka)

Figure 1. Donaldson-Smith's Sparrow Weaver / Mahali de Donaldson *Plocepasser donaldsoni*

Figure 2. Somali Bee-eater / Guêpier de Révoil *Merops revoilii*

Figure 3. Masked Lark / Alouette masquée *Spizocorys personata*

Figure 4. Masked Lark *Spizocorys personata* and female Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus*

Alouette masquée *Spizocorys personata* et Ganga à ventre brun *Pterocles exustus* femelle

Figure 5. Chestnut-headed Sparrow Lark / Moinelette d'Oustalet *Eremopterix signatus*

Figure 6. Greater Kestrel / Crécerelle aux yeux blancs *Falco rupicoloides*

Figure 7. White-headed Buffalo Weaver / Alecto à tête blanche *Dinemellia dinemelli*

Figure 8. Vulturine Guineafowl / Pintade vulturine *Acryllium vulturinum*

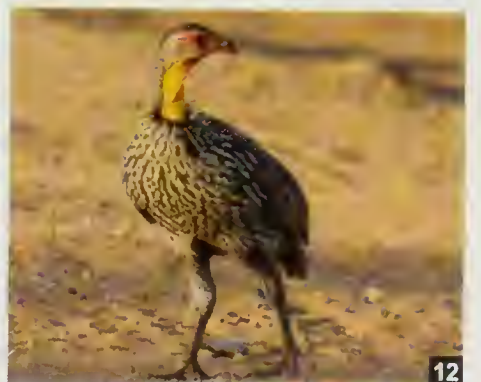
Figure 9. Kori Bustard / Outarde kori *Ardeotis kori*

Figure 10. White-bellied Go-away Bird / Touraco à ventre blanc *Corythaixoides leucogaster*

Figure 11. Fischer's Starling / Spréo de Fischer *Spreo fischeri*

Figure 12. Yellow-necked Spurfowl / Francolin à cou jaune *Francolinus leucoscepus*





the park include Mountain Olive Thrush *Turdus olivaceus abyssinicus*, African Dusky Flycatcher *Muscicapa adusta marsabit* and Grey Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina caesia pura*. Given that the hill forests of Marsabit and other northern Kenyan montane outliers are surrounded by vast tracts of desert, it is relatively unsurprising that the forest birds encountered here are frequently represented by distinct subspecies.

Being late March, migrants such as Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus acredula*, Eurasian Roller *Coracias garrulus*, Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka* and Isabelline Wheatear *O. isabellina* were frequently encountered. The north of the park is mainly scrub and open desert, providing excellent opportunities to photograph species such as Buff-crested Bustard *Eupodotis gindiana*, White-throated Bee-eater *Merops albicollis*, Red-fronted Warbler *Urorhipis rufifrons*, Donaldson-Smith's Sparrow Weaver *Plocepasser donaldsoni*, White-crowned Starling *Spreo albicapillus horrensis* and the *argentea* subspecies of Croaking Cisticola *Cisticola natalensis*.

Dida Galgalu desert

Didi Galgalu desert lies between 500 and 750 m and is an arid rocky plain with large areas of low-lying, black basalt rubble interspersed with sandy desert areas including active low dunes. Some expanses are bare, but others, both rocky and sandy, were grass-covered as a result of recent thunderstorms. Although largely dry during our visit, small streams within the sandy valleys support open forest which offers shade for an array of desert species. Isolated patches of dense thorny, low *Acacia* thicket occur widely and provide further shelter.

After leaving Marsabit, we drove north into the desert to look for one of our main target species, Masked Lark *Spizocorys personata yavelloensis*. A migrating Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* disturbed a large group of Chestnut-headed Sparrow Larks *Eremopterix signatus*, Masked Larks and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus olivascens*, which had all been seeking the shade of basalt boulders. Somali Bee-eater *Merops revoilii*, Somali Courser *Cursorius somalensis littoralis* and Somali Fiscal *Lanius somalicus* were increasingly common as we proceeded north into the desert.

The following day, Masked Larks were found in the same area, a long stretch of flat black basalt ventifacts beside the main road at 02°37'N 38°03'E. They appeared to be confined to an area of a few kilometres, with none seen north or south of this area. Where recent thundershowers had yielded their rain, the basalt desert was covered in short grasses. Other areas were bone dry. The grassed areas held not only Masked Lark but concentrations of Kori Bustard *Ardeotis kori struthiunculus* and Northern Crowned Plover *Vanellus coronatus*. That evening we reached Turbi where we obtained good photographs of 'Horr' White-crowned Starling *Spreo albicapillus horrensis* and the *maculosus* subspecies of Spotted Thick-knee *Burhinus capensis*.

Chalbi desert and Horr

Chalbi desert, at 550–800 m, is a mixture of rocky basalt desert and sandy areas. To the west, most of the sandy areas are covered by dense *Comiphora* scrub. Most of the area is relatively flat but in the west Mt Kulal, which reaches 1,340 m, an extinct volcano at the south-east corner of Lake Turkana, rises from the desert.

In the mission village of Kargi, we came to a small waterhole where we photographed Pink-breasted Lark *Mirafra poecilosterna*, Crested Lark *Galerida cristata somaliensis*, Yellow-spotted Petronia *Petronia pyrgita*, Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis* and several others. Pitching camp, there was a wealth of wildlife so we created a temporary waterhole using a tarpaulin. Star-spotted Nightjars *Caprimulgus stellatus* were soon flitting around, but unfortunately we quickly fell asleep. By the following morning the water was gone and a host of footprints indicated that we had missed a good show.

Continuing west we headed up Mt Kulal. The valley at the base of the volcano is forested and we quickly photographed a group of 'Horr' Scaly Chatterer *Turdoides aylmeri boranensis*, some 100 km north of its known range. This is perhaps unsurprising as the forests follow riverbeds, and this riverbed originated some 100 km south-west! Surveys may well reveal that chatterers occur along such valleys far into the Chalbi, provided the habitat holds out, which if confirmed would expand its known range considerably. Climbing Mount Kulal via a very narrow track, we encountered some new

species including **Somali Golden-breasted Bunting** *Emberiza poliopleura* and **Red-billed Buffalo Weaver** *Bubalornis niger intermedius*, as well as the majestic **Gerenuk** *Litocranius walleri*.

Lake Turkana

The south-east shore of Lake Turkana is an arid basaltic boulderfield running down to the sandy, silty shores of the lake. We used Loyangalani, a small village on this shore, as our base and stayed in cabins at El Molo campground. The area is very hot and rugged, but the lakeshore abounded with waterbirds and waders (many of them en route to Eurasia), none of which seemed too alarmed by human presence, and permitted close approach.

Lake Turkana to Maralal

The Maralal area is rugged, with high forested hills, steep valleys and upland badlands, interspersed by desert scrub and wide open grassy highland plateaux at higher elevations. We returned south towards Maralal through Southern Horr

region into Western Samburu. The main track is very rough with many steep climbs and descents. On the steeper parts, we usually stopped and birded around the passes to let the engine not over-heat, as well as occasionally changing the water. By driving slowly and checking waterholes and other suitable habitat, we obtained excellent photographs of species such as **White-bellied Bustard** *Eupodotis senegalensis canicollis*, **Rosy-patched Bush-shrike** *Rhodophoneus cruentus hilgerti* and **Eastern Violet-backed Sunbird** *Anthreptes orientalis*. We stayed at a small guesthouse near the centre of Maralal.

To view more photographs and the complete bird list, please visit our website: <http://www.birdexplorers.com/>

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